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Education

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Introduction

The Mediterranean is in the center of the world. Early in the history of mankind it witnessed the creation and development of great cultures, civilizations and religions which all considerably contributed to the growth and progress of humanity and world advancement. Its countries and peoples have shared together the pains, discomforts and pleasures of working jointly to attain common goals and objectives. Yet, we all realize that the existing relations nowadays among its communities are not up to the standard or to satisfaction. Facts of history and geography reinforced or pressured by requirements of present and future developments assume much more cooperation and coordination in order to achieve common interests in all areas. There is minimal effort being devoted by governments and civil societies to meet the aspirations and hopes of the people. Often, Mediterranean peoples find themselves emotionally and irrationally taken by political slogans focusing or pointing to the terribly exhausting conflict of the Middle East. This conflict has to a great extent, shaped relations between peoples and states. Still, the situation is deteriorating and exhausting all material and human resources of the people of the region. Unfortunately, a just and durable solution to the conflict does not seem to be on the horizon. The absence of political stability left little room for the people of the area to come together to jointly think freely and out loud in terms of their present and future. I know Jordanians and other Arabs who look to Europe with admiration and appreciation. They all expect more attention to their problems and complaints. They feel this way because European countries on the other side of the Mediterranean are closer to them based on history and geography facts.

Education among many fields of interest is probably the most important. In most Arab countries, similar to other spheres of development, education emerged under tight political, governmental and economic conditions and circumstances, which faded to provide for sound and healthy education policies and strategies taking into account the standards and criteria of the advanced Mediterranean countries.

However much has been achieved in the Arab countries by education. Still, education in these countries is lacking and suffering in terms of its philosophies, visions, policies, strategies and programs. Education reports and documents presented usually by officials avoid talking about basic issues regarding serious political, social and cultural matters. Mediterranean, regional and international pressing issues do not receive full attention. More focus goes to the glorification and beautification of ruling forces and political regimes. Little attention is given to the redesigning and reconstructing of the human being who is free, balanced, integrated, futuristic, open minded and without any inhibitions rooted in history and culture or need.

I do not know enough about education anywhere in the world. However, my readings lead me to conclude that education systems even in the advanced western countries lack the means and wills to produce the human individual who was always a key concern of philosophers, intellectuals and thinkers over decades and centuries.

Steven Wolk from the United States writes:

Schools of today are the wrong places to go to and feel your humanity. We cannot and should not any longer tinker with a broken and inhuman paradigm of schooling.

He adds:

We must stop schooling our children as if they were products and reclaim our schools as sacred places for human beings. We must rethink our classrooms as vibrant spaces that awaken consciousness to the world, open minds to the problems of our human condition, inspire wonder and help people to lead personally fulfilling lives... Otherwise, we will not be a democracy of the people, but a corporate nation of workers, TV viewers, and shoppers.

Isn't this actually the case in our countries! As professional educators and concerned thinkers, it is our responsibility to challenge curricula and to create schools that are personally and socially transformative.

It is a known fact that our schools apply standardized curriculum. Students, teachers, principals and parents will have to cope with, willingly apply, patiently evaluate and monitor. But if we take seriously the claim that education is supposed to prepare each young person to realize his or her own potential, given their different interest, aptitudes and aspirations, how can standardized curricula be justified? It is always claimed that well educated and informed citizenry is a crucial factor for the vitality of a democracy. Education supposedly, is the most important factor in the development of informed citizens who willingly and actively participate in all forms of democratic affairs including especially, elections. To our disappointment this is not the case in most democratic states. The USA is a good example where the downward trend in voter turnout is quite obvious. Young people between the ages of 18 to 24, the most recent products of the US education system post the lowest numbers of any group. The US becomes a more educated society and its citizens vote less. Therefore, the claimed correlation attributed to the interaction between education, citizenry, and democracy does not hold or difficult to validate.

Principles and Guidelines for the New Mediterranean School and Curriculum

- Recent sophisticated developments in technology has introduced new means, methods, systems, strategies which have completely changed roles and responsibilities of teachers, principals and students in learning-teaching processes. Every 12- 24 months Apple releases a new version of the Mac operating system (OS X). Microsoft does likewise for PCs. Teachers do not do teaching anymore. They have something else to do, and likewise the school principals.
- Participation and Partnership is a crucial factor in the attainment of goals and objectives. Students, teachers, principals, parents, community representatives will have to work together to effectively make the change.
- Traditional school systems and standardized curriculum have become outdated. They hinder progressive ideas and thoughts. The stereotyped curriculum does not have room for students and teachers to initiate and innovate diversified opportunities to deviate from the norm and the familiar. An inquiry-based curriculum built on a foundation of actual experiences in and out of the school will demonstrate its success in the changed behaviors, perceptions and insights of individual human rights.
- School textbooks, activities, performance assessments, and all other traditional facilities do not provide enough towards the attainment of the required experience.

Our aim is to design a new education and school curriculum and be called the “Mediterranean Curriculum.” It is a multipurpose, interdisciplinary, integrated and comprehensive. Every school in every grade in all neighboring countries must have a “Mediterranean Curriculum.” It should be mandatory, designed and managed in different forms and strategies, conducted in a free atmosphere where all beneficiaries would actively and enthusiastically get involved. The Mediterranean Curriculum must give special emphasis to Mediterranean Awareness and to Global awareness. One of its basic principals is realizing the fact that the world has become a small village, and the Mediterranean is a beautiful neighborhood in that village. Of course, this does not contradict with the basic principles concerning each individual country which has the right to maintain and preserve its own heritage and character.

Much work will have to be done since we do not want education systems to primarily serve as a pipeline into college or work place. We want school that can connect the education of youngsters and youth to the mission of building a real and strong democracy, human rights, freedoms, peace building and human empowerment in a stable and secure Mediterranean.

It is anticipated that the future education system would be based on four principals:

- a. Science (including mathematics)
- b. Humanities and social sciences
- c. Technology
- d. Arts and sports

Each component (pillar) will have a 25% weight of the overall curriculum.

It is also proposed that 30-40% of contact hours will be spent in real life setup managed collectively by the school and community representatives.

Recommendations:

The author of this paper envisions the following as possible means to promote collaboration and cooperation among Mediterranean countries:

- It is suggested that the following be listed in “Athens Declaration” including a “Common Pledge” addressed to the Mediterranean countries (governments and civil society).
- The establishment of the “Mediterranean Cultural Center.” Located perhaps in Athens. It is a non-governmental organization and serves as an umbrella for all related activities. Its main functions at the beginning would be to conduct brainstorming seminars, workshops, and dialogue meetings primarily to create a constitution for the Center and institutionalize it. Membership is open and free to everyone from the neighboring countries. The basic function of the Center is to conduct research and socialize its findings and recommendations. Education is one basic component is the foundation of the Center.
- Based on the fact that various channels of communication and professional or human interaction among practically all publics of education, it is of great importance to aim for the initiation of the following unions/ societies/foundations/organizations:
 - a. School principals (elementary and secondary)
 - b. School teachers (all levels)
 - c. School psychologists
- These establishments are open to all principals, teachers and school personnel (administrative and technical). Their main function is to promote and facilitate all kinds and forms of professional and social interaction among school staff and cadres. The development and improvement of the profession is core element of their activities. However, they are guided by the noble purpose of the mission which is “Towards a Bright Future of the Mediterranean Peoples and Countries.” Of course, research is a basic instrument and tool towards the fulfillment of their objectives.
- The establishment of an accreditation council whose major functions are:
 - a. To set the standards and criteria of the School of the Mediterranean
 - b. To define the characteristics of the school which would meet the criteria of the School of the Mediterranean
 - c. Establish the rules and regulations for the school accreditation
 - d. Establish standards, rules and regulations relevant for the school licensing and likewise school principals, teachers, guidance and counseling personnel
- The establishment of an “Academic-Professional Pre-Service Teacher Training Institute.” This Institute is of great significance since it will set the ground for future professional programs and activities seeking education improvement and development. One core component of the curriculum of this institution, in addition to the academic and professional components, would be a third one focusing on valued of the Mediterranean culture and character.

Regarding higher education much could be done to support the purpose,

- The establishment of a “Higher Education Council of/for the Mediterranean”

- The establishment of unions/associations where all universities of the Mediterranean countries would be members
- The establishment of an accreditation board for higher education institutions, schools, and universities

The above possible initiatives will provide forums of different forms and objectives where university academic and administrative channels of communication and interaction are open and possible.

- The establishment of a research center to provide through research, academic, professional, social and political leadership. The center would be a source of data and information objectively and scientifically concluded in order to be used by policy makers and strategic planners in Mediterranean countries.

Students and Youth

This group makes probably more than 50% of the total population of the region. I believe they are the most important for the present and the future progress and development of their peoples and states. They are the policy makers, planners and leaders of tomorrow. The idea here is to influence their behavior to promote tolerance, respect for diversity and to defend human dignity. They need to be subjected to the new culture based on full and intelligent awareness of its common values, attitudes, interests and mutual benefits. I feel sorry that they are not receiving the attention they deserve especially when we realize and recognize the uniqueness of their capacities and abilities. Thus, it is the essence of our venture to take their matter honestly and seriously.

A number of student organizations will have to be initiated in the Mediterranean for school and university students. They will have somehow to participate in the creation and development of these organizations. All forms of communication and interaction among them are necessary. These organizations will take the role and responsibility to organize all kinds of professional, personal, cultural, scientific, artistic, and sport exchange. I would propose here that the creation, socialization, constitutionalization, and institutionalization of these organizations must be mostly left to their freedom of choice.

Students' communication and interaction may take different forms:

- Regular conferences, workshops, seminars clustered in subgroups or open groups
- Creating platforms for meetings to discuss specific issues
- Expanding the space for their participation in the already existing forums
- Designing special activities focusing on special issues (tolerance, fighting discrimination, etc.)
- Making active use of other human societies and organizations (The Red Cross-Red Crescent Movement)
- Involving them in voluntary activities in their communities and in others communities of their choice
- Organize school visits in the form of exchange programs established between individual schools and between groups of schools at a wider scope
- "Research Network" is of great value to effectively deal with students' issues and interests

